

Partners in learning



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Yvonne Cotton, Annie Kilner and Jackie Oliver describe how student workers – or Library Support Assistants – are enriching the student experience and informing the development of services at Teesside University Library.

TEESSIDE University Library and Information Services (L&IS) has been employing student workers since 1997. Initially, the students assisted with the shelving of stock and first level IT enquiries. Seventeen years on, the employment of students by the library is no longer simply a reactive measure taken to bridge gaps in staffing. Working in partnership with students is both a university priority and one of L&IS's Strategic Aims. Today's student workers – Library Support Assistants (LSAs) – are valued members of our staff who play an important role in service delivery and the provision of informal peer support. To build further on this well-received aspect of service, the university has recently introduced a more formal method of peer support in the shape of Peer Assisted Study Sessions (Pass). These sessions, run by student volunteers, are proving very successful and contribute significantly to the provision of a successful study experience for Teesside University students.

Library Support Assistants

The LSAs are able to deal effectively with students because they, too, have experienced similar issues or challenges in their own student journey. This element of shared experience is a key factor in the success of the LSA role. The LSAs are seen as approachable precisely because they are students themselves. The shared ground of concerns and anxieties places both learners and LSAs on the same plane. This level ground creates an informal and dynamic environment in which students often choose peer support to assist with their enquiries, rather than go through the more formal channel of contacting other library staff. As there is less formality, transactions are more relaxed and pitched at a level where a student is comfortable and more receptive to advice and guidance. A unique relationship exists between the LSA and the student because of their shared student experience.



A Library Support Assistant demonstrates self service.

Peer assisted study sessions

L&IS manages an academic skills centre called the Learning Hub which offers support for writing, maths and study skills. Part of its vision is to 'provide a holistic approach to learning support' in partnership with academic Schools, professional services and departments, and students in order to 'deliver an innovative and strategic approach to learning support'. Having heard about peer assisted study sessions from Pass National Centre staff (www.pass.manchester.ac.uk), it was decided that this would be an excellent way of supporting



Pass Leaders from higher years support the study skills of lower year students.

learning by using students as partners. The way that the Pass scheme was set up at the university was informed by a project that researched the experiences, strategies and expectations of Teesside University students tackling challenging assignments. This project was awarded funding by the university's 'Student as a Researcher' scheme and included an undergraduate student who played a major part in the research team. Findings from the research were enriched by the involvement of a student, and revealed how highly students valued support by their peers including setting up their own informal networks to facilitate this.

Experience from Teesside University, other universities and from the evaluation of our pilot scheme, showed that many students are happier talking about areas they don't understand with other students rather than lecturers, so peer mentoring seemed an appropriate support system.

Facilitating role

Pass is an international scheme whereby students from higher years support students from lower years within a subject area. Its aim is to improve the study skills and academic performance of the participating students, and to foster a greater sense of belonging to their course and university. It is important to note that Pass Leaders are not there to teach. They facilitate sessions to get their groups to work together to learn from each other. Students who apply to be volunteer Pass Leaders should be trustworthy, non-judgemental, team players, enthusiastic, friendly and approachable. The direction of Pass sessions is decided by the students and it is up to the leaders to run the sessions in an

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interesting and meaningful way.

All Leaders receive 12 hours of training on the key principles of Pass, facilitation techniques and ways of running sessions. Leaders are asked to commit up to three hours a week for planning and running sessions. This includes a weekly debrief where there are discussions about how the sessions went, ideas for the future, and leaders are offered extra support and training e.g. careers support. L&IS liaise closely with the university's volunteer service, so the leaders get accreditation for the hours worked. After running a successful pilot in two subject areas in early 2014, Pass has been expanded to four subject areas, and by January 2015 it will be running in all five schools in the university.

Building on this success, L&IS has now been awarded Student as Researcher project funding by the university to enable the department to partner with students in a

research team which will use ethnographic methods to inform the design of library space and services.

Skills for life

As well as complementing the library service, the employment of student workers and volunteers helps to develop general life-wide and employability skills from which they will benefit when they leave university. For some students, working as an LSA or Pass leader may be their first real employment experience.

Working in a customer services environment and as part of a team helps both home and international students develop key skills which are critical for future employment. These include: communication; basic competencies such as computer literacy and numeracy; personal skills such as self-motivation, time management and organisation; critical thinking; team working; influencing and leadership skills. This employment experience provides LSAs and Pass Leaders with practical examples to talk about in future job applications and interviews. Indeed, in feedback, the student workers cite confidence and self-worth as key benefits of working in the library and said they would do it again if they had the chance.

The challenges

Employing student workers and volunteers can be challenging. Teesside University employs a large number of LSAs each academic year to complement existing library services and to provide critical roving support throughout extensive opening hours. Inductions need to be planned, coordinated and often repeated for the annual cohort. The logistics of producing



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and maintaining a timetable for each week during the academic year can be complex. Staff compiling the rota work around study timetables and availability in order to ensure service continuity, as well as to meet individual study needs. Inevitably there are swaps to be taken into consideration on the timetable which need to be closely managed in order to mitigate any potential gaps in the rota.

Communication

Communicating with the cohort of LSAs needs to be clear and concise. Quite often the student workers are travelling directly to work from lectures without having had time to read any emails. A verbal briefing at the start of a shift has proved to be the most effective way to communicate essential information. Time is also allowed within the shift for LSAs to access work emails. LSAs are treated as full staff members and this expectation needs to be reiterated.

Support mechanisms

LSAs frequently work during self-service hours when the usual support mechanisms are not available. Roles and remits need to be made clear at the outset and re-visited throughout the academic year. Shift briefings with supervisors are supplemented with termly meetings involving all LSAs,

their supervisors and their managers. This forum is a two-way information exchange, placing value on the student workers and their input into library services, as well as giving supervisors and managers an opportunity to reiterate the key aspects of LSA roles in order for them to work effectively.

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A very special partnership

Putting the challenges aside, the working partnership between the library and students is rewarding in many ways. For L&IS they provide valuable informal and formal peer support for fellow learners which often goes beyond helping with first level enquiries. For students, they offer the opportunity for new (and not so new) students to gain information and skills from more experienced learners. For the LSAs, the payback is more than monetary – they leave us with valuable training and skills which enhance their employability. For the Pass volunteers, too, the experience gained in terms of leadership and mentoring adds immeasurably to their skills set, and may well help set them apart from other new graduates when entering a highly competitive job market.

There are also rich rewards for L&IS. As well as helping to deliver an excellent service, the student workers are an ‘ear to the ground’ through which useful feedback and ideas are channelled. This is a truly symbiotic relationship which helps to inform the development of our service and enrich the student experience at Teesside. [1]